

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon  
June 26, 2011  
Romans 6.12-23  
"Sin and All That"  
Pastor John Guthrie

A preacher was winding up his temperance sermon with great fervor, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." And the congregation cried, "Amen!" "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it in the river." And the congregation cried, "Amen!" "And if I had all the whiskey and demon rum in the world, I'd take it all and throw it in the river." And the congregation cried, "Hallelujah!" The preacher sat down. The song leader stood up very tentatively and announced, "For our closing song, let us sing hymn #365, 'Shall we gather at the river.'"

If you want a really light read, I would highly suggest you avoid Paul's letter to the Romans, and especially the first eleven chapters of that letter. That's because they are mostly about sin. But not just about sin. They also revel in the good news that sin has been defeated in Christ Jesus. Nevertheless, the reading can be more than a little daunting.

Chapter 2, verse 1: Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. Chapter 3, verses 11-12: There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.' That theme prevails throughout those first eleven chapters, but of course with the solution to our hopelessness. That solution is Jesus Christ, and only Jesus Christ.

If you really want to know what Paul has to say about these things, I heartily recommend a reading of the Romans letter. It is not light, but it is extremely good news. Read Romans.

In the text leading up to chapter six, Paul makes clear our hopelessness in the face of sin, and the fact that no adherence to a set of rules (that is, the Law of Moses) can save us. We are too much enslaved to sin. Its dominance over us is too overwhelming. Think of a twig being swept along by the waters of a flood. We are powerless against sin.

But God is not, and that is the good news of the Romans letter. Indeed, we will see Paul's most eloquent and emotional expression of his own powerlessness, and God's power, in chapter 7 next week.

This is all very distasteful, isn't it? We know we are fundamentally good people. We don't make a habit of lying, although we must admit that we do it now and then when it will get us out of a tight place. We don't steal or engage in all of those illicit sexual practices that Paul condemns so heartily. We are really good people at heart, are we not?

Paul would say, no: we are not. Even those of us who don't commit any of the cardinal sins still commit others. Unless you can claim that everything you do and say to sisters and brothers in this fellowship and outside of it, is motivated by self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

And that's exactly Paul's point, of course. There is no one who is righteous, not even one. In the first part of chapter six, however, Paul claims that our old sinful self has been crucified with Christ, and we have been raised "in newness of life." Christ's resurrection is our resurrection into a new life. But Paul also makes it clear, even as applied to himself, that we can and indeed will continue to commit sin. So what is this new life in Christ really all about? That's in part what he addresses in the passage we read today.

The question is, who is our master? Who is your master? And who is my master? Paul claims in chapter six that we are going to be enslaved to something. Christ's death and resurrection have set us free. Now we must choose: who will our new master be? The victory of Christ has set us free from the overwhelming, hopeless bondage of sin. Now we get to make a choice. Will we live in the newness of life Jesus has brought? Or will we choose again sin, and death?

When I was growing up I would sometimes ask my dad what he was going to preach about on the coming Sunday. His response and my continuing questions became a game that we played time and again. "Dad," I would say, "what are you going to preach about this Sunday?" His answer was always the same: "Sin." And my response was always the same, especially since I always wanted more detail than that. "What kind of sin?" And the consistent answer: "Bad sin." And that was all the answer I would ever get. I would have to wait until Sunday to find out what the sermon was really about.

Paul sees all of us as traveling a two-lane road, with the lanes going in opposite directions. We are either traveling east or we are traveling west. In one direction is sin and death. In the other direction is righteousness and life. We are either going one way or the other.

It is central to the Romans letter that we are not saved from death by anything we do, and especially not by obeying a code of law. We are saved from death by the love of God, the grace of God, expressed in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. That redemption and salvation make it possible for us to choose if we are going to head toward sin and death, or toward God and life. Without the sacrifice of Christ, we don't even have a choice. We would be enslaved to sin, and doomed to death. Now we have a choice. We can choose life, or we can choose death.

In chapter six, verse 19 Paul uses one of those twenty-dollar theological words: sanctification. Sanctification is the process that the Holy Spirit works within us to make us ever more Christ-like, day by day and year by year. It is a life-long process. Obviously the word is related to the noun "saint:" it is the process by which all of us become more and more holy. When we choose righteousness and life, we choose the path of sanctification.

The clear implication of Romans is that you and I have to make that choice every day. Every day we have to choose whom we are going to serve. Every day we have to choose who our master will be. Every day. In the words of Joshua, the leader of the Israelites, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

You know what sins are your own trap. I know which ones are mine. You know what thoughts, words, and deeds lead you in the wrong direction toward death. One astute commentator has noted that we can pretty quickly determine who it is that we serve just by noting carefully how we spend (1) Our time. And (2) Our money.

We are not left alone in this choosing, of course. Even in the battle against sin, the Holy Spirit of God battles alongside us. That is also very good, of course, because otherwise the battle we

would be losing.

One day a certain man prayed this prayer. Dear God, so far today I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over-indulgent. Thank you for guarding my behavior, God. But in a few minutes I'm going to have to get out of bed and from then on I'm probably going to need a lot more help.

You and I have been set free from the doom of sin and death. Now we get to choose who our master will be. Will we return to sin, and choose to live in sin, which leads to death? Or will we choose the living God, and God's righteousness, which leads to life?

Paul reminds us that none of us is righteous, not a single one, apart from the saving grace of Christ Jesus. All have sinned, he writes, and fall short of the glory of God. The sins we commit may not make headlines, but they are sin nevertheless.

But we get to choose who our master will be. Everyone sins. But not everyone is enslaved to sin, and some are on the path Paul calls sanctification: being made more and more Christ-like, day by day.

At the end of the passage, Paul writes this: "Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So. Who's your master?